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ABSTRACT

The national Language Development Project in Australia, an undertaking concerned with informing teachers on matters to do with language, language development, and language and learning, is described in this report. The various sections of the report establish the project's purposes; offer discussions of developments in thinking and research of the 1960s and 1970s that have shaped professional opinion about language and education in Australia, including studies in early childhood language development, language in learning, and language variety; outline the relationship of the Language Development Project to that body of opinion; and analyze possible trends in language development in Australia to which the project might contribute--particularly in oral communication. (FL)

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THE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AND ORAL COMMUNICATION IN SCHOOL YEARS 5 - 8

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INTRODUCTION

The national Language Development (LDP) was conceived in 1976 in consultation between the then National Committee on English Teaching and the Curriculum Development Centre. It was planned in response to a growing body of professional opinion in Australia concerned that the teaching profession be better informed on matters to do with language, language development, and language and learning.

That such a body of opinion should exist owed much to international developments (principally in the U.K. and U.S.A.) in thinking about language and education, having their origins at least as far back as the early 1960's.

This paper will attempt to establish:

i) the present purposes of the Project;

ii) developments in thinking and research about language and education of the 1960's and 1970's which have shaped, and which continue to shape, the body of professional opinion about language and education in Australia;

iii) the relationship of the LDP to this body of opinion;

iv) possible future developments in language development in Australia to which it is hoped the Project will contribute - particularly, for the purposes of this Conference, in oral communication.

THE PRESENT PURPOSES OF THE PROJECT

The LDP is committed to promoting children's language development in children in school years 5 - 8 - the period of the middle school years, in which the children move from the primary to the secondary school experience. The period was selected as one in which too little was known systematically about children's language development, and how to foster it.

The Project is concerned with the needs of both mother tongue speakers of English, and with second language users - either children of migrants born here, or children who have themselves migrated here. More particularly,

the children identified in the latter group are not those beginning to use English, but rather those who have achieved some functional proficiency in English, sufficient to be in school alongside mother tongue users, but who frequently have problems coping with the language demands of schooling. Such children are to be found in virtually all Australian schools, yet we have not as a profession considered their needs sufficiently.

In the name of the Project, CDC staff are currently undertaking visits of negotiation and discussion to all States, with a view to inviting support for the creation of State LDP Task Forces, involving State, Catholic and (if possible) Independent participation. A Task Force would consist of a group of language specialists - both mother tongue and second language - who would work on a particular problem or task in language work, having one of three possible outcomes:

i) the development of teaching materials for use with children to help promote language development in some areas - audiotapes, videotapes, activity cards, books;

ii) the development of professional support materials for teachers - guidelines and strategies, descriptions of aspects of the language - with which teachers might be better equipped to promote language development;

iii) summaries of modest pieces of research with recommendations for further work in language development.

The CDC's role is to discuss and assist in the determination of such tasks. In addition, it will coordinate activities across States, bringing about a sharing of information and a synthesising of the most important ideas emerging. As well, the CDC will mount its own in-house LDP team of three, which will undertaken some curriculum materials development itself.

DEVELOPMENTS IN RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THINKING AND RESEARCH ABOUT LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

The current concerns in Australia with language, language development, language and learning, all had their origins in the 1960's. Throughout that decade all Australian States produced revised English syllabus

documents (I) and though they have continued to receive revision and to be enhanced from time to time by the appearance of various support documents, they have remained both similar across the continent, and preoccupied with the same concerns over time.

The concepts of these syllabus documents have been reinforced by such activities as the holding of inservice courses for teachers, or by the reasonably frequent visits to Australia of a number of gifted overseas experts working in language and education. In addition, teacher education programs have in various ways attempted to promote an understanding of the various English documents.

It has been frequently argued, incidentally, that the concepts of the new English have not always been understood or properly implemented and while that may well be true, the point need not be immediately relevant here. The fact is that it is possible to identify a number of propositions and principles about language and development which officially at least, and indeed in many places in practice as well, have been widely endorsed and discussed.

All State English documents then, identify four basic language 'arts' or 'skills' (both terms are used) - listening, speaking, reading and writing - and they all see growth in language capacity as central both to personal growth and to capacity to learn. All documents stress the importance of much and varied opportunity to use and hence develop these language capacities. A noticeable feature of the documents in question is that they have said rather less for the last 15 years or so of what were once considered the proper preserves of the school subject 'English' - literature in particular. Literature has not been abandoned, though since the concerns with English teaching have been perceived increasingly in experiential terms, literature is viewed as only one of many forms of expression or communication through which children may encounter experience, values and ideas. It is language and growth in it which are identified as central in our English syllabus documents.

Behind the emergence of such interests in English language work have been a number of related and seminal development. Such developments have been

part of a wider international climate of interest in language and education to which significant though often differing contributions have been made from both the U.K. and the U.S.A. It will be necessary here briefly to discuss some of these developments.

Studies in early child language development

One of the first and very important developments having consequences for discussions of language development in schooling has been the research into early child language learning. From the late 1950's, through the 1960's and continuing into this decade, important research work has looked at the processes by which children appear to learn to talk, and it has thus opened up a number of related questions. For example: What is the relationship of speaking to the other language skills or modes (in particular, reading and writing) and what are the implications of an understanding of that relationship for educational practice? What part does learning language play in the individual's personal growth, and what is its role in shaping personal identity? How does an examination of the latter question throw light on our view of language and its functions and uses generally, not simply in the young child learning to talk? How do we view language as a social phenomenon? How does its use for example, help to define and shape sociocultural values, attitudes and beliefs? How does an understanding of the significance of language in mediating social attitudes and relationships tell us more about the features of a language which any speaker has to learn to use the language successfully?

Much of the early research work particularly in the United States, of people such as Berko (1958), Brown and his colleagues (1968, 1971, 1976) and McNeill (1970) showed a preoccupation with considerations of structure. Thus, for example, it examined the emergence of phonological structure, or of morphological structure, and it looked intensively at the emergence of syntax and sentence structure in young children's talk. Such a preoccupation with structure, whatever the gains made, nonetheless was at the expense of much research interest in issues of meaning in language and of motivation in learning to use language. The child was perceived as a learner of language rules where those rules were thought of independently of meaning and of the context in which they were used, and where the learner's concerns in learning to use the language received scant research attention.

That such a preoccupation with structure should apply in much early work on child language growth reflected a debt to Chomsky and his dominant place in American linguistic research in the 1960's. Subsequent work on early child language growth has shown a debt to other and more recent movements in linguistic and sociolinguistic work - work having a number of methodological bases, yet sharing many common concerns.

Bloom (1970) for example, acknowledged a debt to Labov, whose interests in the study of language have directed attention to questions of social purpose in explaining the nature of language. Thus, in studying the emerging language of three young children, Bloom found that each developed a grammar and a use of the language different from the other two, and that the explanation of the differences lay in the differing experiences and purposes of the children.

Other researchers have approached the study of children's language in a manner owing much to the concept of the ethnography of speech (2) as developed in particular by Gumperz and Hymes (1972).

Those working in the latter area are less concerned with the notion of a set of linguistic rules that the speaker of a language learns (though they don't deny that the concept of such rules may have some validity) and more concerned with the notion of the knowledge necessary to employ those rules so that the language genuinely carries meaning. They draw a distinction between 'linguistic competence' and 'communicative competence', where the latter terms refers to 'what a speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in culturally significant settings' (Gumperz and Hymes: 1972, vii).

Working within a different set of methodological assumptions about the nature of language, Halliday (1973, 1975) has developed a view of early language learning having some parallels with that of the American researchers examining child language discourse. He draws no distinction however, between linguistic competence and communicative competence, and argues that language is as it is because it serves social ends. It is a resource with which to build relationships, to shape and express meanings, to seek and offer

information. It is learnt as a system through which we make meaning, where that concept of system in itself implies both knowledge of grammar and lexis, and social knowledge.

Collectively, the research into early child language development has offered us a number of concepts relevant for our concerns as teachers:

i) a recognition that the child has mastered the essentials of the grammar of his language by the time he arrives at school aged 5 or 6;

ii) a recognition that language is learnt in use and as a necessary part of expanding experience;

iii) a recognition that learning language is a developmental task of fundamental importance, facilitating capacity to relate to others and to understand self, to acquire and control services, goods, and information;

iv) a recognition that in learning how to use language, the child is also learning much social knowledge.

The study of language in learning

Two major and related developments in the research on language in the last 15 to 20 years have examined the role of language in learning. Both have emerged in the U.K. and have had considerable impact in Australia. I refer to the study of language in the classroom, and to the study of children's writing abilities.

The concerns in the former have been to examine i) children's own use of language with which to learn, and ii) patterns of teacher/pupil dialogue. The interest has been to consider how useful have been many of the traditional patterns of classroom talk, and what we can learn of how children themselves use language to learn.

Britton (1971) Barnes (1971, 1976) and the Rosens (1973) have all made significant contributions to the body of research and discussion on language in the classroom. In the American context, writers such as Cazden (1972) have considered often related questions.

In Britain the interest in the study of language in the classroom as it emerged in the 1960's would seem to have developed fairly naturally from the wider concerns with language and personal growth which were part of the decade. Dixon's little book Growth through English (1967) was perhaps the single most important book on the subject, and it was widely read in this country. As its title suggested, it had attached central importance to opportunity for children to grow through language.

Those involved in the study of language in the classroom have attempted by recording and analysing both small group talk and classroom discussion, to arrive at some conclusions about the use of language in these contexts.

Barnes's early study (1971) showed that in the secondary classrooms he examined, teachers did most of the talking, and that the remaining time, since it was shared by some 30 pupils in the average classroom, offered little opportunity to any one child for any lengthy talk.

Barnes, Britton and Rosen have collectively had a great deal to say of the value of allowing children to 'talk their way into understanding'; they have pointed to the tentative exploratory nature of much small group discussion and have argued that in that very tentativeness and openness lies stength. The pattern of most classroom interaction has tended to follow what the American Hoetker (1968) has termed the 'recitation pattern', relying heavily upon much teacher questioning, and relatively brief responses from pupils, frequently no more than reiteration of items already known.

The gap between teachers' talk with its use of specialist and/or relatively abstract language and the language of children has also been examined by the same researchers, and it caused Rosen (1972) for example, to look at the language of textbooks, so often remote from the language children themselves use and understand.

In the study of writing, Britton and others of the London Institute of Education (1975) undertook a major study of children's writing abilities

11-18. Their analysis of a great number of pieces of writing produced in school situations led them to postulate three functions of language in writing - the transactional, the expressive and the poetic. A piece of writing was deemed transactional if it offered information or instruction: it had an end outside itself. The expressive was written to satisfy the writer himself, or some person capable of being interested; it involved offering thought and feeling important to the self. The poetic writing was of the kind that seemed to exist for its own sake, a deliberately shaped verbal construct offered for the pleasure of making and sharing it.

The study of the Writing Research Unit suggested that most writing sought in schooling was of the transactional kind, yet Britton and others in the team argued the importance of much wider opportunity for expressive writing, both because that was important to the child's growth, and because it was itself a necessary prerequisite to the successful mastery of more structured forms in writing, where transactional and poetic functions were eventually involved.

The related concerns with language in talking and in writing led to an interest in promoting concern with 'language across the curriculum' where the term suggested an interest in examining language use, and language in learning, in all areas of the schooling, not simply in lessons devoted to the school subject 'English'.

Behind the examination of language in classroom, in small group, and in writing, has lain the belief that if language is, as the research on early child language learning suggests, so powerfully part of personal growth and experience, then good educational practice should allow children to use their language with which to learn and shape their new understandings. In addition, it has been suggested, the role of the teacher in promoting opportunity for children to use their own language to come to terms with information is a critically important one. It has been the child learning <u>through</u> language - his own language rather than that of the teacher, at that - which has been the focus of attention in such work.

The study of dialect, language variety, and the ethnography of speaking

Another development in language studies over the last 15 to 20 years having an influence upon thinking about English language teaching in this country as in the U.K. and the U.S.A. has been the sociolinguistic interest in language variety.

Interest in dialect and dialectology is relatively old as an area of linguistic study, but interest in the study of language variety, and in what some linguists term register variation, has been a more recent phenomenon. Such a phenomenon is part of the wider linguistic interest to confront issues of studying natural discourse - language as people commonly actually use it - rather than dealing with relatively idealized models of language use. For the evidence suggests, when we begin to examine language as it is actually used, that any speaker is capable of using language in very variable ways indeed. Working from different methodological perspectives, for example, Labov (1972, 1976); Halliday (1974, 1975, 1976) and Hymes (1968, 1972 a, 1972 b) have considered the ways in which language is used by any one speaker and by any group of speakers. And beyond this, they have addressed themselves to consideration of why language is so varied.

Each of us speaks a particular dialect, but within that dialect each of us demonstrates capacity to use language differently from situation to situation. In Labov's terms (1972) we demonstrate that we are capable of shifting style in language depending upon topic and context. In Halliday's terms (1974) we adopt a different register depending upon i) field of discourse (a term referring to subject talked of and physical context), ii) tenor (a term referring to the relationship between participants in a situation) and iii) mode (is the language used spoken or written? and any of a number of further variants within these two broad areas) (3). In Hymes's terms we demonstrate our communicative competence whenever we use language, for we employ the social knowledge we have making it possible to effect subtle shifts in our use of language depending upon physical context and purpose. (1972) Hymes has suggested that a person having only 'linguistic competence' in a language would be some kind of social monster, for capacity to employ the linguistic rules in all the range of situations available to the speaker involves 'communicative competence' - knowledge of communicative rules.

Whether one adopts Labov's model, Halliday's, or Hymes's, we all show great variety in language use.

Linguistic interest in the study of dialect has in recent years been held to have important implications for educational practice. Since no dialect, not even standard dialect, can be demonstrated to be in itself superior to any other, it has been argued on both sides of the Atlantic that we need to reconsider conventional notions of 'correct English' in the classroom context. Labov's work (1976) has of course been very important in uncovering many of the myths about Black American English and other dialects in the United States, and people like Cazden and Hymes (1972) have all argued the relevance of looking afresh at much conventional classroom practice, and in particular at children often unfairly held to be not succeeding at school principally because the dialects they use are different from those of their teachers. Similar arguments have of course been advanced in the U.K. by many writers, including for example, Trudgill (1975) and Stubbs (1976).

In summary, three general propositions having consequences for the climate of thought about language teaching and education in Australia, have emerged from recent sociolinguistic work:

i) the notion that one's use of language - one's dialect in fact - reinforces and is indeed part of one's identification with a particular community class or group, and that educational practice should recognise and respect this;

ii) the notion that no dialect in English can be demonstrated to be better than any other, and that standard English is itself a dialect, rather than the 'correct form' of the language;

iii) the notion that we use language for a variety of purposes, and that the factor determining use in any particular context is always appropriateness in that context.

THE BACKGROUND, THE LDP AND THIS CONFERENCE

Enough has been said to sketch in some of the major themes in thinking about language and education which of the last two decades. How is it relevant to the LDP and to this conference?

It is relevant because as I suggested earlier all this research has formed part of the body of ideas which have informed and which continue to inform thinking in our States about language and language development, both as that thinking is expressed in various syllabus documents and in the wider context of professional discussion and debate about language in Australia. It is relevant too, because the LDP has emerged fairly naturally as a consequence of that debate and discussion. The LDP was indirectly, a consequence of the deliberations of the Unesco Seminar on the The Teaching of English held in Sydney in 1972 and the holding of that very seminar owed much to the wider climate of international concern with language and education of the previous decade. On the one hand, the Project was born of the interest in language and language development in Australia, and on the other hand, it was intended to foster that interest further.

The rationale of the LDP reads in part:

Language is central to our experiences and understanding, both as individuals and as community members. It is learnt in interaction, and the capacity to use it effectively in both the spoken and written forms is essential for school learning and for participation in community life.

Language is itself a significant feature of community life for it carries many of the beliefs and values which are part of the community. The process of schooling involves some exploration of community values, and the principal means at the disposal of teachers of exploring these is language.

Language may be viewed as a resource or tool with which individuals make meanings, and part of learning language is learning how to adapt and alter it for different contexts and purposes, in speaking, listening, reading and writing. A necessary function of schooling is to develop and extend capacities to use language for a wide variety of purposes.

Children at school in Australia have diverse needs, both because personal experience and background always differ, and because large numbers of children speak a mother tongue that is not English. Good language teaching programs must respond to the diversity of backgrounds. It is the right of

all children to grow up proficient in language, and this will include the right to grow up bilingual, functioning successfully in English as well as another language. An important responsibility of schooling is to assist this process.

Language development starts early, for during the first few years of their lives, children learn a great deal of language in a wide range of uses. Parents, siblings, or other significant family and community figures are the first teachers of language, and they continue to have an important part to play. The role of the educational process that school provides is to build upon and extend the language capacity learnt initially in family and neighbourhood.

There are three aspects to language development:

i. learning languages;
ii. learning through language;
iii. learning about language.

The first - learning language refers to the building up of basic language resources: mastering the language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The school will assume a major role in teaching reading and writing, though such teaching will be most successful when linked to the uses of language which form part of the experience of the wider community.

The second - learning through language - refers to the capacity of using language to learn, articulate and express information about one's world.

The third - learning about language - refers to taking language as something in itself capable of examination - an object worthy of study. It can be studied as -

1. <u>system</u> in terms of its meaning, grammar, vocabulary, phonology and writing system;
2. as an <u>institution</u>, in its relation to the community, as a part of culture; or,
3. in terms of its <u>varieties</u>, by examining register or dialect variation.

The relationship of such a statement to the findings of much of the earlier research work requires little comment. It is necessary to comment however, on the areas of need in our understanding of language and education which appear to have emerged in Australia, and about which current [illegible]e have not done enough. Such matters should concern the Project, and [illegible] would hope they may invite some discussion at this Conference.

What has emerged powerfully from the great body of research and thought which I reviewed earlier, and which has helped shape the very context of professional understanding in which we meet, is a heightened understanding of the role of language in personal growth, in expression of personal identity, and in learning. We also have a heightened sense of the social significance of language and of its fundamental role in carrying, defining, supporting social and cultural values and attitudes. In short, we have learnt a great deal of what is done <u>through</u> language and we have considered how teachers should use that understanding further to promote growth through language.

We have learnt far less of how to promote in children some deliberate control of their language use, though I would submit that a function of the educational process will be to promote in children some deliberate consideration of their language from time to time. Growth in and through one's language is clearly important: to achieve such growth, some thinking about one's language will also properly occur.

It is of course true that most of the time, we use language - particularly in the spoken form - without much reflection. It is also true that using language successfully (i.e. to control and direct properly what one wants to say) frequently involves considerable effort, and a model of language development which denies interest in promoting some deliberate examination of one's language would seem to be incomplete.

The point would seem to me particularly relevant to participants at this Conference with its concern in oral communication. We would all agree, I imagine, that opportunity to use language with which to learn in schools is important, and that the teacher has a critical role in making such opportunity available. The concept of oral communication will however take us further than

that. What is it useful for children to consider, to examine, to reflect upon, if their capacity to use language in the oral form is to be challenged and extended? What experiences can we teachers provide to sharpen children's interest in and awareness of the language they and others around them use?

It seems to me that we can take much here from the linguistic concepts of dialect, and of register, and the recent research work in the ethnography of speaking. Each of these offers us teachers both important insights into the nature of language as a very flexible resource with which we communicate, and also by implication, relatively simple procedures capable of adaptation to classroom practice, so that children may consider and examine language and language uses themselves. I have in mind that children might undertake such activities as the following:

1. collecting, listening to and discussing recordings of themselves in a variety of contexts - classroom, playground, domestic;
2. collecting and listening to recordings of adults talking in a variety of contexts in public life - on radio, on TV, in parliament, and in commerce;
3. collecting and recording samples of people talking in specialist situations when specialist registers come into play - one thinks for example, of doctors, lawyers, agriculturalists;
4. recording samples of people talking from different age groups - contrasting the old and the young;
5. recording and examining the language of different purposes - of explanation, of description, of question and answer, and of that most immediately close to action (in the latter case, as any one who has examined it can testify, the language is frequently meaningless unless the listener was either present himself in the physical context, or is offered considerable explanation).

One would hope that such activities would lead to a consideration of such issues as the following:

1. how do people express judgements about others through language and in their reactions to others' language;

2. how justified are many of the judgements we make about people on the basis of their language use?

3. why do different situations and purposes require different language uses? How does understanding this help us understand how we use language ourselves, and how we may adapt it for different reasons?

4. how does the organisation of language alter in different contexts - here one would consider the for example, sequencing of information, the manner in which grammatical and lexical items are used and alter for the language of persuasion, as compared with that of debate, as compared with that of explanation, as compared with that of relaxed conversation;

5. what is standard English? How does it differ from non standard forms of English? Why is it useful to be able to use standard form in some situations?

Such activities can of course lead on to other and differently organised activities, some of them of a more familiar and orthodox kind. Good drama scripts (for which incidentally we have a real need in the 5 to 8 school year age group) can be used, particularly if attempts at play readings and full enactments of such plays are approached in the light of the kinds of understandings of language suggested above. Children can also of course create their own scripts - create dialogue in fact for clearly specified situations where a measure of success will be the apparent verisimilitude of the language achieved for the context. The possibilities for examination here are limitless, from school situation to domestic situation, to interview situation, to wider public life; in each, the children might examine the language of relaxed conservation, of public debate and persuasion, of explanation, of description, of narration, and so on.

Such classroom activities require in teachers better theoretical understandings of the sociolinguistic concepts involved. At present they are not widely taught or considered in most teacher education programs in Australia, though they might well be incorporated into the courses currently offered in language and education. In addition, the various State syllabus documents

and their support materials might take up such matters in much greater detail.

In addition, one would look to the various tertiary institutions in Australia capable of undertaking more research likely to support and help our work. I would hope that such research would lead to:

1. useful descriptions of the nature of Australian English;
2. clearer accounts of the differences between spoken and written forms of the language, as they could be used by teachers to promote proficiency in both speaking and writing;
3. the development of better research accounts of children's language development as they move into adolescence. Is it true for example, that entry to adolescence is marked by a growing grasp of different conversational registers, and how can we use such information for our work as teachers?
4. the development of bodies of high quality tapes - both audio and video - with which teachers might introduce language studies in classroom situations, and with which children might be encouraged to go on and collect recordings of the sort I listed above. One of the LDP's sister projects the Sounds of Australia Speech Project, funded by CDC and directed by Professor Delbridge of Macquarie University, is currently producing ten such high quality tapes.

The holding of a conference such as this can do much to generate the necessary professional interest and understanding in matters to do with oral communication. It can thus be of great benefit to the Language Development Project, and ultimately, of course, to the many children in Australia in whose interests the Project was originally planned.

NOTES

1. At the end of 1977, Joan Rothery and I were commissioned by CDC to undertake a major study of all English syllabus documents throughout Australia, for presentation in a paper at the LDP Conference held in Canberra 1978 in January 1987. This disucssion is based upon that study.

2. A recent account of ways in which the research interest in discourse analysis is being applied to the study of children's discourse is given by S. Ervinn-Tripp and C. Mitchell-Kernan (eds.) Child Discourse New York: Academic Press, 1977

3. Halliday is not the only linguist interested in such concepts as field,tenor and mode, though he has in particular attempted to show their relevance to educational practice. Useful discussions are offered in A Reader on Language Variety edited by C.S. Butler and R.R.K. Hartmann Exeter Linguistic Studies, Vol I. University of Exeter 1976.

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